

GETTING LOST “*INTO THE WILD*”:

EXPLORING THE ROLE OF NARRATIVE TRANSPORTATION IN THE EXPERIENTIAL CONSUMPTION OF MOVIES

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Abstract

Although it is obvious that consumers enjoy watching movies for many reasons that range from mere short-term entertainment to the complete personal immersion into the movie narrative, a full understanding of the experiential consumption of movies and its contribution to a consumer's subjective quality of life is still lacking. Thus, this paper takes an existential-phenomenological perspective to provide some alternative insights into consumers' holistic movie consumption experiences. By using a form of interactive introspection, the two researchers examine and discuss hereby their own individual private consumption experiences with the recently released movie *Into the Wild* (US 2007) as a complex tapestry of interrelated factors. The introspective data indicates that a consumer's personal engagement with the movie narrative, its characters, atmosphere and underlying philosophy is of particular importance for one's enjoyment of the movie, as this allows for and even enhances the consumer's temporary feeling of complete immersion into its imaginary world. The intensity and nature of an individual's experienced transportation into the movie narrative is hereby determined less by socio-demographic variables such as age or gender, but by one's own very private motives and intimate involvement with the holistic movie consumption experience.

Keywords: Movie Enjoyment, Experiential Consumption, Narrative Transportation Theory, Subjective Personal Introspection

Introduction

For more than a century, consumers all over the world have enjoyed watching movies for many reasons that can range from mere short-term entertainment to the personal experience of complete immersion into the movie narrative (Green et al. 2004) and identification with its characters (Cohen 2001; Wohlfeil and Whelan 2008). Yet, a closer review of the literature on movie consumption indicates that we still lack a full understanding of how an ordinary consumer experiences the consumption of movies and what subjective contribution it makes to one's quality of life. This scant attention may have resulted from marketing's primary interest in the economic dimensions of movie consumption, where the focus is often limited to box office performances or the sales and rentals of DVDs in specified markets (De Vany and Walls 2002; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004; Ravid 1999). In doing so, movie consumption is usually reduced to the mere purchase of individual tangible media formats (Basil 2001; Krugman and Gopal 1991) rather than investigated as the actual consumption of movies as intangible brands in themselves (Wohlfeil and Whelan 2008). In film studies, on the other hand, researchers seek to explain the effects of movies on their audiences by means of audience-response theory (Mulvey 1975; Phillips 2003). This involves trained expert viewers discussing in theory how an imaginary, idealised viewer would respond to movie texts and the cinematic experience by assuming probable motives, expectations and prior knowledge (Hirschman 1999). However, a synthesis of ideas from psychoanalysis, linguistics, semiotics, Marxism and feminism has hereby created the image of a passive viewer, who is vulnerable to the manipulative qualities of the cinematic experience (Phillips 2003). Moreover, expert viewers have often discussed suspected audience responses as a means to advance their own political-ideological agenda (see Mulvey (1975) as an excellent example).

A very different approach was recently taken by Wohlfeil and Whelan (2008), in which one of the authors observed introspectively his own experiential consumption of the movie *Pride & Prejudice* (UK 2005). While they identified a complex tapestry of interconnected factors contributing to a consumer's movie enjoyment, they found that a consumer's personal engagement with the film narrative and its characters to be of particular importance and provided thereby evidence for the applicability of narrative transportation theory (Gerrig 1993; Green and Brock 2000) to movie consumption. Though primarily applied to reading, this theory suggests that *enjoyment can benefit from the experience of being immersed in a narrative world through cognitive, emotional and imaginary involvement as well as from the consequences of that immersion*, which include emotional connections with characters and self-transformations (Green et al. 2004: 311). Transportation is hereby seen as a process by which the consumer actively seeks to be taken away from one's everyday world into narrative worlds, where one could experience a different self and engage empathetically with media characters like real friends (Gerrig 1993). This personal engagement is further enhanced through out-of-text intertextuality by which the consumer connects the movie to one's own personal life experiences (Hirschman 2000; Wohlfeil and Whelan 2008). In a recent study, Argo et al. (2008) found that consumers' immersion into melodramatic narratives may be dependent on the level of fictionality, whereby females tend to empathise more readily with narratives that feature "factual" contents, while males prefer to lose themselves in narratives with highly fictional contents. But similar to previous studies (i.e. Green and Brock 2000; Rapp and Gerrig 2006), their hypotheses were only tested within controlled laboratory experiments, where the staged and artificial setup had little resemblance to consumers' real-life experiences. The findings also contradict Wohlfeil and Whelan's (2008) introspective data, which provide clear evidence that the male researcher empathised and even identified strongly with the rather "factual" narrative and characters in *Pride & Prejudice*. Hence, the question remains whether there is any evidence that those findings on transportation theory would reflect consumers' real-lived movie consumption experiences.

Taking an existential-phenomenological perspective (Thompson et al. 1989), this study therefore aims to provide alternative insights into consumers' holistic movie consumption experiences. As both authors happen to be of different gender, come from different cultural backgrounds and live in different countries, we will compare, analyse and examine our own individual private lived consumption experiences with the recently released movie *Into the Wild* (Dir.: Sean Penn, US 2007) and how we connected the movie to our personal life experiences by using interactive introspection (Ellis 1991; Wallendorf and Brucks 1993).

Methodology

In order to truly understand movie consumption as a holistic phenomenological experience from an insider perspective, the focus has to be on the consumer experience in the way it presents itself to consciousness (Merleau-Ponty 1962; Thompson et al. 1989). Subsequently, we used a research method known as subjective personal introspection (SPI), which is an *experiential, private self-reflection on joys and sorrows related to consumption and found in one's own everyday participation in the human condition* (Holbrook 1995: 201). This method has the advantage of allowing the researcher for an easy, unlimited 24-hour access to an insider's lived experiences with the investigated phenomenon without having to wrestle with ethical concerns regarding the informants' privacy (Brown 1998). However, this also means that we now have to disappoint all those readers who were expecting to find hard, scientific data obtained through hypothetical-deductive methods. Instead, we followed for this study an approach that could be broadly described as interactive introspection and involves gaining illuminative subjective insights through comparing, contrasting and interpreting introspective essays (Patterson et al. 1998; Ellis 1991; Wallendorf and Brucks 1993).

As it happens, both authors are of different gender and live in different countries. The first author is female, in her 20s, Algerian, lives in Southern France and is for the purpose of this paper referred to as the female viewer (FV). The second author is male, in his 30s, German, lives in the South of Ireland and is now referred to as the male viewer (MV). Both researchers wrote independently from each other an extensive introspective essay on their personal experiential consumption of the movie *Into the Wild* (US 2007), which, by coincidence, they have both watched recently. Based on Jon Krakauer's bestselling book, the movie retells the true story of Christopher McCandless, a young college graduate who decided to abandon his worldly possessions and leave behind his perfectly planned out life in order to escape the trappings of a society he despised by experiencing natural life in all its immediacy in the Alaskan wilderness. While his journey and view on life touched a number of people along the way, his romantic idealism ultimately leads to his doom at the unforgiving hands of Mother Nature. We then exchanged the two essays and each researcher examined and compared them for both common themes and individual differences. Finally, we compared our two personal interpretations of the introspective essays for similarities or differences and summarised them accordingly (Gould 2006; Patterson et al. 1998).

Major Findings and Discussion of the Data

The thorough analysis of the introspective data obtained from our personal holistic lived experiences of consuming *Into the Wild* (US 2007) has revealed some very interesting findings. For both viewers, the essence of our private movie enjoyment was the arousal, pleasure



and emotional stimulation obtained from the cinematic consumption experience (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982) rather than from maximising some ominous economic benefits (Basil 2001; Eliashberg and Shugan 1997). However, while a tapestry of interrelated factors contributed to the overall movie consumption experience, both viewers experienced the strong personal emotional engagement with the movie narrative and our subsequent ability to loose ourselves mentally *Into the Wild* (US 2007) as essential to our enjoyment of the movie. This confirmed Wohlfeil and Whelan's (2008) earlier findings, as evidenced by the following extracts.

In terms of the lead character Chris, my relationship with him changed several times over the film. At the beginning, I disliked him because he appears to be another spoiled, rebellious and stupid rich kid that feels himself to be totally misunderstood. Then, when the family history was revealed I started to understand his motivations and even empathised with him in his search for a better, more harmonic life based on love and mutual respect. I even understood when he failed to grab his first opportunity. After all, I have failed to notice a few times as well that everything I was looking for was directly in front of my eyes and I just had to take it, but I was too scared or too stupid to see it. However, after he obviously knew that he has found what he was looking for in the flesh right in front of his eyes and feet and still left to fulfil a naïve, romanticised fantasy, then I thought again "what an idiot!" (MV)

"Into the Wild" left me sobbing like a baby; I would go as far as to say uncontrollably – Thank God, I saw this alone and in the darkness. Regarding the character, one scene that stands out in particular is McCandless killing a moose. It both vividly illustrates an intimate aspect of living in the wild and provides an almost existential moment-to-moment take on the newly discovered aspects of the character. (FV)

The story itself is an incredibly important one. Ever had that feeling of wanting to abandon your existing life and living one step closer to nature? I can't deny being touched by the relationships that Alexander (Emile Hirsch) makes on his travels and I was haunted by images of Alexander desperately trying to get food in the Alaskan wilds, in particular his efforts with a moose. This was storytelling so good it could bring you to tears. I was convinced as to touching the nature of Christopher/Alexander. (FV)

It was a captivating movie experience and I believe that it is one of those movies that you can watch over and over again and each time you will discover something new and different. It's also kind of going on a journey of self-discovery yourself each time you watch the film. My relation to the characters differed. I didn't really identify with anyone of them, but empathised strongly with the hippie couple, Ron Franz and even Carine – but the latter could be influenced by my admiration for Jena Malone as the actress who portrayed her. (MV)

Both viewers also experienced an equally intensive level of immersion and empathy with the factual movie narrative. Thus, the introspective data would contradict Argo et al.'s (2008) prediction that a consumer's ability to empathise with melodramatic narratives – whether factual or fictional – would be determined by one's gender. But while its intensity may appear to be similar, we discovered nonetheless some interesting differences in each viewer's account of our private lived movie consumption experiences, which influenced the nature of the personal transportation experience and, hence, warrant a closer examination. Although both viewers agreed that each of our private *Into the Wild* consumption experiences began with a search for relevant information across similar media (i.e. magazines, IMDb, websites,

TV or YouTube) long before actually watching the movie in the cinema, the type of information we sought and our underlying motivations to do so differed significantly:

Once a couple of years, there comes a movie that is both unapologetically soulful and offers a gentle philosophical take on one of the timeless myths and human tendencies. ...The first time I heard about the film was in January 2008 in a French TV talk show. I decided to learn more about the movie by looking for information on the Internet. ... I ensured myself of the quality of the movie by gathering much information on the story, the character, the moviemaker Sean Penn, magazine criticisms; comments comparison between French and English websites. In addition, I checked for the box office of the English media on Yahoo UK. (FV)

My interest and experiential consumption of this movie actually started already as early as October 2006, when I read in an interview with Jena Malone in Mean magazine that it was just being filmed...As it so happened, in this article she talked not only about her then recent film release “The Go-Getter” and her increasing interest in expressing herself in self-produced music and short films, but also that she would soon starting to film “Into the Wild” with Sean Penn. Jena Malone then vividly recalls how she had accidentally hung up on Sean Penn when he phoned her at home near Lake Tahoe to cast her, because due to a defective connection she couldn’t hear him and thought it was an obscene call. I really loved the way she told the story during the interview...In September 2007, the movie trailer of “Into the Wild” appeared on YouTube. Without hesitation I used YouTube Catcher to download the trailer. Not that the trailer was giving much away, but it definitely stimulated an appetite for more in me....Jena Malone being in the movie was enough reason for me to must see it anyway!!! (MV)

As it turned out, the male viewer is fan of a movie actress and, subsequently, much of his interest in the movie stems from her involvement in the film production. In fact, he became only aware of the movie as a result of reading an interview with her. Furthermore, much of his information search was directly associated with the actress, such as catching glimpses of her in the movie trailer, downloading video clips of her interviews or photos of her at the movie premiere. The female viewer, on the other hand, had no fan-related interests and learnt only by chance about the film in a TV show. Her search for information about the movie was driven by her awakened interest in its mythological narrative, the true background story and the lead character’s philosophical ideals, which have “touched” her emotionally. The movie, however, awakened in her an admiration for the leading actor Emile Hirsch – though her perception of him blurred increasingly by merging him with his character.

Emile Hirsch gave the best performance of his career and he literally carried the whole movie on his shoulders....I shared the same values as Emile Hirsch who goes on to display a person, who is selfless and whose goal is simply to go somewhere where he can live peacefully... Throughout, it was Emile’s smiles and caring advice that seem to be constant reminders to me to have hope, to believe that there’s more out there than the rat race we’re so wrapped up in. (FV)

As a result of those different individual motivations for watching this movie, both viewers also differed in our personal engagement with the movie narrative and the characters as well as in the way we actually lost ourselves in the movie experience. As is already evident in the earlier extracts, the male viewer engaged very closely and emotionally with the individual characters in the narrative by sympathising with the parents in their desperate search for their son or empathising strongly with the hippie couple, Ron Franz and Chris’s sister Carine, as defined by Cohen (2001) and Oatley (1999). However, much of his empathy for her may

result from his admiration for the actress Jena Malone, who played her. And though he didn't directly admit to it, there is also evidence that his ambivalent emotional engagement with the lead character Christopher McCandless is more than positive and negative empathy, but in fact a form of identification (Cohen 2001). Indeed, the use of out-of-text intertextuality (Wohlfeil and Whelan 2008), by which the male viewer connected Christopher's experiences on screen with his personal life experiences, suggests that the movie character's naivety, idealism, motives and even foolishness actually served as a reliving mirror for the male viewer's own experiences. Interestingly, the female viewer did not really sympathise, empathise or even identify with any of the characters as such. In taking a macro-perspective, her transportation experiences were instead based on her personal engagement with the lead character's (and, thus, the story's) philosophical view on looking for the human condition and the meaning of life in modern societies rather than with his person. Thus, the female viewer seemed to empathise or even to identify herself essentially with the presented ideals by connecting them through out-of-text intertextuality with her own personal ideals and philosophical views - an aspect that narrative transportation theory has overlooked so far.

The mission of Christopher seemed to be showing that at some point a long time ago, we got so far from what it's really all supposed to be about. He lived by example in showing that the best way to try to figure out, where we went wrong, would be to go back to when man lived in the wild, surviving only on his wits and his instincts. At the end, he made the ultimate sacrifice trying to figure out the answer for us – and he did – that we are social beings, who need companionship and society to be really happy. (FV)

However, despite our different motivations for watching the movie and, subsequently, the different nature of our personal transportation experiences, for both viewers watching a film is like being in a dream where we can enjoy the peaceful moment of losing ourselves into the narrative for awhile. As a consequence, both prefer to watch movies on our own and not to share the experience with others. In fact, we experience disruptive influences on our movie enjoyment such as late-comers and noisy or talking audience members as quite annoying. On the other hand, both viewers engaged in efforts to transform our intangible movie experience into tangible objects that enhanced our feeling of enjoyment of the movie by purchasing the movie on DVD, the soundtrack on CD or an autographed movie poster signed by the cast.

Conclusions

The study's findings clearly prove that movie enjoyment should be understood as a private lived consumption experience that depends on a holistic tapestry of interrelated factors. In line with previous studies, we found that an individual's personal emotional engagement with the narrative, its characters and underlying philosophy, which allow for the temporary immersion into the movie's world, to be of particular importance for one's movie enjoyment. The level and nature of a consumer's experienced immersion into the movie narrative is determined less by age or gender, but by one's own private motives and interests. The managerial implication of these findings may be for film producers to stop heeding the calls of consultants (i.e. De Vany and Walls 2002) for mass-produced, family-friendly, made-by-standard-formula movie packages that serve the smallest common denominator. As consumers seem to enjoy the feeling of losing oneself in the movie consumption experience for diverse personal and intimate motives, the narrative has to be challenging and stimulate personal engagement from a variety of different angles. This would require each movie to be created again as an artistic product rather than an interchangeable commodity. The point seems to be supported by the recent global success and growing popularity of both independent films and world cinema movies that tend to be much more demanding than the current *standardised* Hollywood output. Maybe it is time listen to real consumers how and why they enjoy watching movies...

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